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ABSTRACT

Creative dramatics can be used to teach young children a variety of communication skills. Noisy stories help children to learn and make sounds and later can be used for dramatization purposes. Narrative pantomimes can teach children word order, sensory awareness, and nonverbal communication. Phrases, pictures, and props help stimulate imagination, empathic response, and involvement. Open-ended stories provide students with an opportunity to create their own stories, orally or in writing. Story dramatization, the center of creative dramatics, sharpens listening skills, increases attention span, improves sequential understanding, and allows practice in recall and organization. (JL)

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Fostering Communication Skills in Young
Learners Through Creative Dramatics

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Fostering Communication Skills in Young Learners Through Creative Dramatics

While it is uncommon to think of formal studies in speech communication for young learners, it is common practice to undertake the teaching of effective communication throughout the entire academic process. The communication skills young learners develop should be nurtured, should mature, and should effectively serve them throughout their lives. The importance of developing both verbal and nonverbal communication skills in children cannot be minimized. Approaches for developing these skills should be carefully examined for effectiveness, appropriateness, interest level, and flexibility. Because many communication practices will be presented informally to this age group, teachers should be aware of a format which teaches informally, uses verbal and nonverbal communication, encourages role-playing, encourages both innovative and adaptive behavior, and centers on the development of the total child. That format is creative dramatics.

Creative dramatics offers numerous kinds of communication experiences. A child's interpersonal relationships depend on his ability to express himself through movement and speech in order to communicate with others. His communication serves the numerous purposes of informing and questioning, forming self-concepts, investigating, organizing, and sharing ideas, and enjoying the knowledge, skills, and companionship of others. Through communication the child learns to understand himself, others, and his culture.

Creative dramatics focuses more on communication than theatrical skills, and requires no scenery, costumes, or props. Casting is flexible and works with any number of players in any kind of space. The playings are spontaneous, improvised, and different each time.

Communication skills are enjoyably fostered when creative drama is a part of the lesson. Dramatic play is natural to children and the success they experience in this medium often carries over to other subject areas. For example, creative drama is thought to be "valuable in alleviating emotional tensions that contribute to reading problems, speech problems, and socialization difficulties."¹

In the classroom, creative dramatics activities provide a number of learning opportunities. Noisy stories, for example, help children to learn and make sounds and later can be used for dramatization purposes. Each time a character's name is mentioned, the children say his sound, as in a story based on the following characters:

Lenny Lion - Grrr

Toy Soldier - Hup, Hup

Baby Doll - Mama

Shopkeeper - Ah, me

Narrative pantomimes can teach children word order, sensory awareness, and nonverbal communication. The teacher, for example, might ask the children to pantomime the following:

Yesterday I went on a nature hike. First I crossed a small stream. The water felt cold around my ankles. Then I walked across a stone path. Next I bent down to pick up a flower. It had a sweet fragrance.

Concentration and involvement are needed to successfully communicate the experience through physical action.

Imagination, empathic response, and involvement can be stimulated by phrases. "It was a long, cold winter," for example, will call to mind many images, and children can create, read, discuss, or dramatize stories and/or situations called to mind by these few words. Pictures and props can also be used to develop this kind of activity. Writing and sharing their own narratives will allow students to review their experiences while reinforcing learning concepts.

Open-ended stories provide students with an opportunity to create their own stories, orally or in writing. For example, the teacher may start the story thusly: "It was raining hard on Saturday morning, but I had promised my friend Tommy I'd help deliver newspapers. I took my bike out of the garage, climbed on, and started peddling down the street. Suddenly..." Students read or recite their endings, then several stories are selected for dramatization. There is no limit to the number of stories that can come from this simple beginning, so long as the teacher constructs an opening that allows plot movement in several directions.

Story dramatization is at the center of creative dramatics. Through their playing, students identify with characters, sharpen listening skills, increase attention span, and improve sequential understanding. Reviewing a story before playing it allows practice in recall and organization. It also allows the teacher to check for comprehension in the area of language skills. Children can expand a story they've read by adding characters or by moving the plot forward or backward in time, or

they can use creative dramatics prior to reading to set the mood. In preparing material for dramatization, children may read that material several times, each time seeking greater understanding which will encourage depth of involvement in playing, individualized characterization, and clearly motivated action. Oral evaluations of their play encourage children to be objective and to strive for excellence.

Dramatic play is natural to a child. Play is how children learn about and explore the world around them. Communication skills help them to function in this world. Using creative dramatics to develop communicative competence can be an enjoyable and effective instructional strategy.

Footnotes

¹ Ruth Beall Heinig and Lyda Stillwell, Creative Dramatics for the Classroom Teacher (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

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